

Words With Power: Kotodama Reconsidered

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Words With Power: *Kotodama* Reconsidered

Cody M. POULTON

University of Victoria

In his public address at the opening of this conference, Oe Kenzaburo spoke of a desire to create a "world language" (*sekai gengo*) for writers, a "universal literature" readily understood by anyone regardless of linguistic or ethnic background. But Oe has always had to run against the grain of the Japanese language and culture in his apparent efforts to create a "universal literature". "Japaneseness" has usually been defined by the Japanese themselves as whatever remained most particular, opaque and untranslatable to the rest of the world. Above all, the Japanese have tended to regard their own language as that which marks themselves as most different from everyone else.

Language is intimately tied to one's own sense of identity, not only as an individual who thinks and communicates but also as a member of an ethnic group. This is especially true of Japanese discourse on identity. At the heart of much of this discourse is the idea of *kotodama*, or "the spirit of words", which Roy Andrew Miller has called in one of his characteristic polemics (1982, 131) "the single most important fetish term in the entire modern myth of *Nihongo*". To be sure, *kotodama* was transformed in the twentieth century into an ultranationalist ideology used to promote the idea of a spiritual supremacy for the Japanese state, its people and its language. Without doubt we can also see a resurgence of such an ideology — an essentialism which is both linguistic and ethnic — in the contemporary industry of *Nihonjinron*, or "theories of Japaneseness".

Does language possess a soul, or spirit, or life-force? Modern linguists and most philosophers deny that it has. But such a belief, not just in the uniqueness but more importantly in the spiritual supremacy of their native tongue, is at the heart of many Japanese views. Discussion of *kotodama* thus implicates itself not only with linguistics and the philosophy of language, but also literature, religious belief, ethnicity, and political ideologies. Can *kotodama* as a phenomenon, to say nothing of the term itself, be translated from one language to another? Is it even possible to be rational about the subject?

Is it mere superstition (or worse, ultranationalist cant) to ascribe a spiritual power to language? At stake here is an old philosophical debate over whether language is no more than a closed system of arbitrary signs, or whether there is a direct correspondence between language and reality, word and object. The debate is by no means over, although the former argument has for some time now held greater currency. The skeptical ethic of modern linguistics, in particular, has held this view, one which is almost by definition a disenchanted

one: we have (or so we think) successfully purged our languages of their religious and ritual resonances. But we have not yet begun to assess the full consequences of that purge. Can the new, sanitized, idiom of intellectual discourse do justice to modes of thought and expression which are much older and in many respects alien, even hostile, to our current ways?

These are some of the problems which I hope at least to address here in this essay. Space permits but a brief outline here of a complex discourse on language and spirituality in Japan, but what I want to demonstrate is not only how this discourse has in many ways served to define (rightly or wrongly) what is distinctly “Japanese”, but also how *kotodama* has its analogues in many other languages, or rather, in the ways many other cultures have perceived a particularly spiritual essence in the words they use. Contemporary scholarly language in many ways impedes our understanding of this phenomenon; at the very least, it is necessary to have recourse to more than one academic discipline to make adequate sense of the term without reducing it completely to other, discredited or incredible, ideas. I should also state at the outset my own academic background (or is that bias?) as a student of Japanese literature. *Kotodama* is by no means an exclusively literary phenomenon; indeed it is only derivatively and tangentially so. But anyone who makes it his business to read literary texts must also be keen to language’s ability to move us. Indeed, the “spirit of words” cannot be discussed without paying attention to the function of the emotions. Language, when it really works (that is *moves* us), has an effect which is essentially magical, that is, if we understand ‘magic’ as an attempt to achieve spiritual effects through the manipulation of physical objects.

***Kotodama*, Animism and Vitalistic Views of Language**

What exactly does *kotodama* mean, or more properly, what might it have meant to the early Japanese? In one poem contained in the *Manyōshū*, M. 2506, Kakinomoto Hitomaro alludes to what seems to be an ancient practice of using language for oracular purposes:

kotodama no yaso no chimata ni yuge tou uramasa ni noru imo wa aiyoramu

On *kotodama*’s/eighty-branched road/I do evening divination./The oracle truly foretold/that my love would come to me.¹

Here Hitomaro speaks of going to a special place haunted by “the spirit of words” to receive an oracle about his lover. *Yuge*, an “evening divination”, pointed to a belief that spirits were abroad at twilight. Not only time, but place was also important in creating the setting for a visitation of the spiritual. Crossroads, bridges and various other places teeming with human traffic were traditionally thought to be frequented also by the spirits. Hitomaro’s “eighty-branched road” is also an intersection for the *kotodama*. Orikuchi Shinobu mentions a similar mantic spot in Kawachi province (near present-day Osaka) where the words of passersby were thought to settle like dew among the grasses of the roadside, to be gathered up later by one who seeks an oracle (Orikuchi 1985 [OZ 3], 70-75). The idea was that these disjointed vestiges of strangers’ conversations would be given a new context and personal significance by the eavesdropper. Orikuchi associated this practice with his idea of *marebito*, or “stranger

gods", who came to humans at festive times and sacred places to give blessings or tell fortunes.

The Japanese gods, or *kami*, were particularly associated with specific geographic locations. Miller observes in early Japanese beliefs in *kotodama* "evidence for the essentially impersonal orientation of Japanese culture. [. . .]The earliest conceptual linkage was one that operated directly with the land, with places and cult-sites, and with the role that geographical entities [i.e., *kami*] play in the operation of primitive socio-linguistic magic" (Miller 1977, 292). Humans seem to have been only incidental, intermediaries between language and the land. Although love is an important subject in the *Manyoshu* and would appear to belie Miller's comments about the impersonality of Japanese poetry, in its ritual significance, it was essentially understood as a means of linking humanity with the generative powers of nature. This may suggest a belief common to many cultures that earth was not created to serve humanity, but rather the other way around. The function of ritual language in such a culture is different from, say, that in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Instead, language is used to awaken and quicken the creative powers of the land. Something of this belief lies behind one other genre of poetry in the *Manyoshu*: *kunibome*, or "homages to the land" (cf., for example, Emperor Jomei's praise-poem, M.2). In turn the generative powers of nature, when summoned, could flow into personal affairs and revitalize them. Language (the *kotodama*) was the necessary mediator of this exchange of human and natural energies.

At the same time, there existed in Japan the idea that nature itself created language. Some trace of this notion can be found in such metaphoric locutions as, for instance, *kotoba* (or *koto no ha*): "words", literally, "leaves of speech"; or, for that matter, *Manyoshu*: "Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves". Throughout history, nature has been regarded as a kind of text — or, to be more accurate, a living entity gifted with speech. It is place and not person that was endowed with *kotodama*; the poet or ritualist could but only invoke this power. The *Manyoshu* sings of such spirits of the landscape, in large part because words and nature were thought in a fundamental way to give birth to one another. The land was capable even of absorbing and storing language, as we have seen in Hitomaro's poem (M. 2506) and in related beliefs in mantic places. One's environment was thus regarded as a great repository of language, from which one could draw whenever necessary. But when the poet leaves familiar territory he too falls silent. There was no language to evoke an alien landscape, because it was inhabited by unknown gods whom the poet could not communicate with. Thus, when Japanese travelled to China, it was necessary to have recourse to the Chinese language in order to portray that country's landscape. It was not simply a matter of the student's homage to Chinese civilization that he sought also to express himself in Chinese.

The link between language and landscape was in itself a reflection of another important aspect of sociolinguistic magic in Japan. Belief in the numinous power of language, in the words of George Steiner, underlined "a pact negotiated between word and world" (Steiner 1992, 185). *Kotodama* was an expression of a belief that language not only shared in the same essence as the object it represented, but also that a word's sound was fundamentally identical

to its meaning. Thus, thought, speech and reality were regarded as unmediated, bearing a direct correspondence with one another. Word and object, sound and sense, were essentially aspects of a single totality. To say the name was to invoke the thing. Such ideas lay behind not only *kotodama* in Japan, but find expression in many other world cultures. In Genesis, both God and Adam literally name creation into existence. In many societies language is regarded as neither an invention nor a convention, but as a gift bestowed by God or Gods. Anthropological evidence would seem to indicate that language has been in some form with homo sapiens for one hundred thousand years or more: the development of language has run hand in hand with the origins of our own species. Thus it is true, in one sense, that “language may have created man, rather than man language” (Steiner, 133). Human consciousness, our social and technological development, is inextricably connected to our ability to express ourselves. From this recognition, it is not so very far to the belief that words themselves are divine.

A belief in an essential relationship between words and the things they stand for was further confirmed for the archaic Japanese by the homophony of *koto* (words, speech) with *koto* (things). There is no definitive evidence for an etymological relationship between these two words. But neither can philology disprove that such a connection was simply an ex post facto argument based on a phonetic coincidence. The Chinese graphs for ‘speech’ and ‘thing’ (*yan* and *shi* in modern pronunciation) were frequently used interchangeably to transcribe the word ‘*kotodama*’, and thus no fundamental semantic difference was regarded between the two during the earlier stages of the introduction of the Chinese written script in Japan (cf. Kamata 1990, and Toyoda 1991).

Not surprisingly, many commentators have thus suggested that *kotodama* was originally a form of sympathetic magic, but I would argue that such Frazerian terminology does little to explain just what is going on here. It is one thing to say that primitive people, unlike modern folk, believe that language is not arbitrary, but bears a necessary ontological correspondence with physical reality. But it would be altogether false to assume that primitive societies ever really regarded language and reality as identical. Not even so-called ‘savages’, according to anthropologist Stanley Tambiah, believe that by saying a word they can somehow conjure a thing into existence. To imply otherwise is to invest “the savage with linguistic pathology” (Tambiah 1985, 33). Similarly, the Japanese critic Kobayashi Hideo asserted that “just as nobody ever tried to climb a mountain in a boat, [the early Japanese] never attempted to move mountains simply by uttering spells” (quoted in Nakabayashi 1993, 56-57). Both Tambiah and Kobayashi have had recourse to metaphor to explain how language forges its connections with reality, but it is not entirely clear how we can distinguish religious and magical uses of language from more simply rhetorical and literary figures of speech. The most important distinction to be made here, however, is that language does not so much influence physical reality as it is intended to move human feelings. The emotive power of language was evidently thought to be shared by humans, birds and beasts, as well as supernatural creatures, as we can see in Ki no Tsurayuki’s famous preface to the *Kokinshu*.

More work is needed here on this thorny problem of the relationship between language and reality, but the mechanistic view of language (Saussure's linguistics are the perhaps the purest expression of this) presents what may be a false dichotomy between word and object. Bronislaw Malinowski's more pragmatic approach to language may give us one possible solution: "In its primitive uses" he writes "language is . . . a mode of action, and not an instrument of reflection", he writes; and further:

A word is used when it can produce an action and not to describe one, still less to translate thoughts. The word therefore has a power of its own, it is a means of bringing things about, it is a handle to acts and objects and not a definition of them. (Malinowski 1956, 312).

Words, according to Tambiah, "are the most realistic representations of the concept of force"; they are both invisible and metaphysical by nature (Tambiah, 29). Thus, perhaps a more useful comparison is not between word and object, but rather between word and deed. Similarly, the Hebrew word *dabar* (rendered as *rhema* or *logos* in the Septuagint translation of the Torah) means both 'word' and 'deed'. Theories of language as mimetic representation or of reflection have tended to divest language of its energetic (and hence spiritual) properties. The result to my mind has been a nominalistic and abstract approach to language, together with a general disenchantment among many writers and poets in the only tool they have. For many modern writers, language became a prisonhouse.

***Kotodama* and Japanese Identity**

We are able to reconstruct, albeit tentatively, an idea of what Japanese believed and practised regarding their language only after those beliefs and practices, together with the language itself, enter the literary record. According to Miller (1977, 291), the shift in both the meaning and usage of *kotodama* and other related terms appears to have occurred so early that it was to all intents and purposes complete by the time the earliest texts were written in Japan, around the eighth century. Thus, both internal and external influences associated with Japanese contact with continental culture brought about a transformation of early notions of a spiritual or divine power inherent in language.

Kotodama 'thought' — that is, an ideology making claims for the presence of a spiritual power in the Japanese language that, in and of itself, serves to define what is not only uniquely 'Japanese' but also superior to all other languages and cultures — seems to have a relatively recent history. The word came to assume a central position in many of the nativistic theories on the Japanese language, literature and culture which were developed during the Edo period under the rubric of *Kokugaku*, or "National Learning". This is, of course, not to say that the word, or some associated idea, did exist prior to *Kokugaku*; indeed, had the term not first appeared in some of Japan's most ancient literary texts such an idea would likely not have become the cornerstone of much of their philosophy.

It would nonetheless seem that *kotodama* played in earliest times a much smaller role than

it later would in defining Japanese identity. The word appears in only three poems of the *Manyōshū*. I have already cited one of them. But what is remarkable is that in the other two instances *kotodama* is used specifically to define Japan as “a land blessed by the spirit of words” (*kodama no sakiwau kuni*). Both of these poems were written to wish Godspeed to embassies bound for China, and thus were overtly public and patriotic works. The first of these poems, *Manyōshū* 894, is a *chōka* by Yamanoue Okura:

*Kamiyo yori iitsutaete kuraku soramitsu yamato no kuni wa sumekami no itsukushiki kuni
kotodama no sakiwau kuni to kataritsugi iitsugaikeri ima no yo no hito mo kotogoto me no mae ni
mitari shiritari*

It has been recounted/ down through time/ since the age of the gods:/ that this land of
Yamato/ is a land of imperial deities' stern majesty,/ a land blessed by the spirit of words./
Every man of the present/ sees it before his eyes/ and knows it to be true . . . (Levy 1981,
390)

The second poem (*Manyōshū* 3253-4), by Kakinomoto Hitomaro, is the older of the two, and was composed in 703 on the occasion of the dispatch of the very embassy which Yamanoue Okura accompanied to China:

*Ashihara no mizuho no kuni wa kamunagara kotoage senu kuni shikaredomo kotoage zo waga suru
koto sakiku masakikumase to tsutsuminaku sakiku imasaba ariso nami aritemo mimu to momoe
nami chie nami ni shiki kotoage su ware wa kotoage su ware wa*

hanka: *shikishima no yamato no kuni wa kotodama no sakiwau kuni zo masakiku ari koso*

The Rice-Abounding Land of Reed Plains/ Is a land where things fall out/ As will the
gods, without lifted words of men,/ Yet I must lift up words:/ ‘Be fortunate, and travel safe
and sound!’/ If you be free from evils,/ Then shall we meet once more;/ So I lift up words
over and over again/ As the waves roll a hundredfold, a thousandfold!

Envoy: The Land of Yamato is a land where the word-soul gives us aid;/ Be happy, fare
you well! (Nihon Gakujutsu Shinkokai 1965, 59)

The argument has been made by Ito Haku (see Miller 1977, 281-89) that *kotodama* does not become a keyword in the ideology of Japanese identity until, in fact, Japanese contact with a foreign language and culture. This helps to explain the word's special usage in the two poems quoted above. *Kotodama* is thus an expression of an awareness among early Japanese that their language and society were essentially different from others like Chinese and Korean, and not only different but blessed by a spirit all their own. The Japanese of this early period were indebted to continental culture, not least for the very technology which allowed them to write down their own history, their songs and their narratives. But faced with such an advanced civilization, it was doubly important to remind themselves, especially as their countrymen prepared to embark upon a voyage to China, that they were not so much inferior as they were simply different. The “spirit of words” was thus a solution to an identity crisis thrust upon the Japanese by their contact with foreign civilization. It enabled them to adapt, to incorporate imported technologies such as writing, while at the same time maintain their own language and native forms of expression.

Kotoage ("lifting of words"), referred to in Hitomaro's poem, is a term related to *kotodama*. Miller (1977, 276) defines this word as "a ritualistic, liturgical action, a formalized ceremonial performance". It described no ordinary utterance, but the 'raising' or 'lifting' of words in a significant and stylized way (as in song or intonation), and not just of any words, but only those thought charged with a particularly spiritual power. These were taboo words, language which could be equally a curse or a blessing, but in either case should not be used lightly. Such verbal taboos exist in many cultures, especially concerning words that identify the sacred (viz. the Hebrew Tetragrammaton YHWH). To say the name of something is to unleash its power, and this can be downright dangerous.

Interestingly, Hitomaro characterizes Japan as a nation which respects this taboo (*kotoage senu kuni*), a taboo which he then promptly breaks by wishing the embassy Godspeed. Hitomaro "lifts words" not once but several times in the poem. This is a rhetorical figure which, for all its purported iconoclasm and its assertion of the individual (*kotoage zo waga suru; kotoage su ware wa*), nevertheless has a ring about it of the most ancient of Japanese verse. Hitomaro is invoking through these ritually charged words the spirits which can give aid and blessing to the ship bound for China: As a kind of poet laureate called upon to compose a poem for a very public and politically important event, Hitomaro evidently felt free to break a solemn taboo prohibiting mortals from usurping the language of the gods. He himself has assumed a sacred role, as spokesman for the Japanese *kami*.

Kotodama no sakiwau kuni; kotoage senu kuni: both epithets were thus associated in a complex of early beliefs regarding the spiritual power of language. The first epithet describes what blessings language brings to the land; the second speaks of a kind of blessing accrued by silence, when sacred words are not, or must not be invoked. The ancient Japanese appeared to believe that the spirit unleashed by language could have both positive and negative effects, and that given its inherent power, it was better more often than not to call upon it. *Kotodama* and *kotoage* were both terms that were readily conscripted by early twentieth century ideologues in order to promote their ultranationalistic message, but as Miller notes "the violence that *kotodama* underwent . . . was as nothing compared to that suffered by *kotoage*" (Miller 1977, 257). The former was used to argue for a spiritual supremacy of the Japanese, but the latter term was used to silence dissent. But in germ at least, this negative notion of language, an argument in support of silence, was already evident at least in its examples from the earliest literary texts.

By uttering a *kotoage*, Hitomaro assumed what the ethnologist Orikuchi Shinobu called "the authority inherent in the utterance itself" (quoted by Toyoda 1991, 57). This was an authority invested in him by the public nature of the event he eulogized, but it also implies the prior establishment of a particular chain of command between gods and humans, whereby divine utterances were mediated by the imperial house, clan leaders, priests and priestesses, and in some cases (like the above) also by poets. According to Toyoda, the command of the chieftains early on in the consolidation of the Yamato state was explicitly associated with the oracular utterances of divinely inspired shamans (Toyoda 1991, 60). The more 'primitive'

stage, in which the *kami* could conceivably possess anyone and speak to others through them, was altogether too egalitarian, and posed a threat to the establishment of a more complex social hierarchy. Thus, native spirits were inducted in the service of statecraft, in a kind of divine right of kingship. This is given mythological expression in two *norito*, or Shinto prayers. In "The Divine Congratulatory Words of the Kuni no Miyatuko of Idumo" it is written that

The Land of the Plentiful Reed Plains and of the Fresh Rice-ears/
During the day seethes as with summer flies,/ And during the night is overrun with gods who shine as sparks of fire./
The very rocks, the stumps of trees,/ The bubbles of water all speak,/ And it is truly an unruly land. (Philippi 1990)

Clearly not a place that anyone, god or human, could easily govern. This chaotic state of affairs lasted, in myth at least, until the land was surrendered by the older gods of Izumo (the so-called *kuni-yuzuri*). Their successors, the Yamato pantheon, then

silenced to the last leaf/
The rocks and the stumps of the trees,/ Which had been able to speak . . . ("Minazuki tsugomori no oharae" (Philippi))

Kotoage, unless it had official sanction, undermined the mystique which temporal power sought to acquire; in invoking *kami* through the sacred power of language, it placed itself on relatively equal terms with the sacred (one who spoke the sacred was also sacred) and usurped the authority of those who claimed exclusive rights to the dissemination of divine command. The Yamato state, like its twentieth century imitator, had a vested interest in keeping *kotoage*, and many other associated ideas and practices (*kotomuke*, *kotodate*, *kotodoi*, *mikotonori*, etc.), under strict control.

Orality and Identity

Regardless of the tremendous production of literary works in Japanese since earliest times, literary culture meant for the premodern Japanese, above all, Chinese culture. This undoubtedly had something to do with the fact that, to a greater or lesser degree, Chinese characters have always been a component of Japanese texts, and they carry a large proportion of the semantic weight of these texts. It was perhaps inevitable that literacy still appeared to be, a millenium and more later, an imported artifact. Chinese characters still look 'Chinese', but the spoken language — especially in its more colloquial forms — is nothing like the written one, and remains resiliently native. It would be hard to find two languages more linguistically unrelated than Chinese and Japanese; accordingly, the Chinese script was not a very suitable tool for transcribing Japanese. Literacy gave rise to immense cultural challenges for the Japanese, not least the problem of how to write down the songs and narratives that were already part of a long oral tradition by the 7th and 8th centuries C.E.

What most distinguished Japanese from other languages for the poets of the *Manyōshū* was the fact that Japanese poetry was still (but barely) an expression of a primary oral culture.

Literary culture was thus regarded as an alien culture, essentially at odds with native forms of expression. This gave rise to an aversion to the ritual use of the Chinese language, even in Buddhist ceremonies. For example, in Book 19 of the *Zoku Nihon Koki*, it is stated that

In our prayers to the Gods and Buddhas for the enduring reign of our emperor, we depend upon the original language of this country, and not upon the language of China; nor do we call upon learned men who write books. It has been recounted that our Land of the Rising Sun, Yamato, is a land blessed by the word-spirit: this has been passed down to us in the words of the ancients, the words of the Gods. Song has ever been employed in a sacred manner when we have sought those things which have existed since the beginning of time. (quoted in Toyoda, 20)

Toyoda Kunio has suggested that a native belief in the word-spirit acted as an “emulsifier” facilitating the Japanese adoption of Buddhism, especially during its popularization during the medieval period (Toyoda, 162). We witness this particularly in the emphasis on the recitation of mantras in the Shingon (literally “true word”) sect, of the title of the Lotus Sutra (*daimoku*) in Nichiren Buddhism, and the *nembutsu* (invocation of Amida Buddha) in Pure Land Buddhism. “What use is scholarship”, Shinran asks rhetorically in the *Tannishō*,

when salvation can be obtained if only one recites [the *nembutsu*] in good faith? Even the unlettered ignorant, who cannot make sense of the scriptures, can easily pass through the gates of the Pure Land if they but call on the Name (quoted in Nakabayashi, 91).

The intent of the *nembutsu* was, in effect, to regain what had been lost through the acquisition of literacy. The implication was that illiterate people are more predisposed to religious faith, not so much because, being illiterate, they were more gullible; rather, because primary oral cultures (as Walter Ong calls them) are also by nature religious cultures. “The letter kills, the spirit (i.e., the spoken word) gives life”, said Paul in his Second Letter to the Corinthians.

The impact of Chinese literary culture instigated a crisis in Japanese linguistic and ethnic identity which had its echoes a millenium after the *Manyōshū* in Kokugaku philosophy. As I have noted, the revival of *kotodama* discourse has invariably coincided with momentous events in Japan’s relations with the outside world. Over the course of 50 years or so around the turn of the 18th century, as many as 50 treatises were written on *kotodama*. Most of these nativist theories and their more modern descendents, including the ethnology of Yanagita Kunio and Origuchi Shinobu as well as some ‘New religions’ such as Omoto and Mahikari are, according to Nakabayashi Nobuhiro, expressions of a reaction against literary culture and an assertion of the superiority of oral transmission. The anthropologist Murai Osamu has recently suggested that this Japanese nativist ideology was in large part a reaction against the introduction of new print technology from Korea in the 16th century, a technology which

influenced the development of literacy and mass culture in the Edo era (in Karatani 1994, 18). But nativism was, I believe, fundamentally a reaction against the Chinese character itself.

Logomancy — the belief in word magic — gave way to logomania in many of the later theories of Japanese nativism. Not all the nativist philosophers believed necessarily in the identity of word and object, sound and sense, but language mysticism in Japan has flowed from one stream of nativist linguistics called the *ongisetsu*, or “phono-semantic theory”. At its crazier fringes this theory not only proposed that sounds are a direct product and expression of meaning, but also that the 50-odd syllables of Japanese were in fact the vocal signatures of *kami* (the so-called *Itsura no kami*, or “fifty gods”). From such theories it was not difficult to propose that Japanese itself was an ur-language, from which all other languages of the world have developed albeit in a distorted fashion. Hirata Atsutane’s ‘discovery’ of *jindai moji* was an attempt to demonstrate the existence of a proto-Japanese script predating the introduction of Chinese characters. (Ironically, Atsutane’s *jindai moji* was actually a version of the Korean script *hangul*!) Far from supporting the idea of literacy, *jindai moji* (which have since Atsutane’s time been ‘discovered’ in ever greater variety) actually affirms orality by subverting the primacy of Chinese literacy culture.

During the 17th to 19th centuries, Kokugaku attempted for the first time in a systematic fashion to create a Japanese philosophy in reaction to prevailing Chinese, particularly Neo-Confucianist, philosophies. Literary and culture critic Karatani Kojin has called Neo-Confucianism a form of logocentrism, one typified by the term *li*, meaning ‘reason’, ‘truth’, ‘justice’, etc. (Karatani 1994, 18). What exemplified Japanese culture and language for the nativists was the absence of this principle. In particular, Shinto was viewed as the antithesis of rational system. If the Chinese character represented the strong semantic core of meaning in the written language, whatever could not be written in Chinese and was therefore resistant to meaning represented, by definition, an indefinable ‘spirit’ said to be quintessentially ‘Japanese’.

Kotodama in many respects resembles the original beliefs associated with the Greek *logos*, that the soul or essence of things resided in their words. We see similar beliefs in Judaism associated with the word *dabar*. But since Plato and Aristotle, this notion of *logos* as spiritual power was transformed into an organized theory of meaning, logic and rationality. Many have claimed that the development of the Greek alphabet brought about a fundamental change in modes of thought and expression. As the scholar of classical Greek, Eric Havelock, has pointed out, the muse learned to write. *Logos* as a rational system has given birth to the academic disciplines in which we work: philology, anthropology and so on, a fact that makes it doubly difficult for us to retrace our steps back to an ethos in which word and deed, religious, aesthetic and technical expression were still intertwined and not segmented as they are in modern life. The question remains, however, to what extent *kotodama* and *logos* have an affinity for each other. If we understand *logos* in its more recent sense to mean a rational principle to which a word gives expression, similar to the Chinese *li*, then we must say that *kotodama*, at least as it has been understood since the Edo era, is the antithesis of *logos*. The

'spirit of words' is accordingly not thought or ratiocination, but the ineffable experience of a spiritual presence in what one speaks. By the same token, the 'spirit of words' represented not what could be translated (the meaning), but whatever was most resistant to translation. Claude Levi-Strauss has written that "'to mean' means the ability of any kind of data to be translated in a different language" (Levi-Strauss 1979, 46). With its emphasis on the irrational, the emotive, and the connotative, the Japanese theory of a spiritual quality inherent in language resembles many views about poetic language. Literature is notoriously resistant to translation: the more 'poetic' it is, the more self-conscious the idiom in its use of linguistic effects, the harder it is to convey a literary work in another language. The purported resistance of the Japanese language to translation is, for many of the more extremist ideologues of Japanese identity, the proof of their ethnic uniqueness as well as the essential 'spirituality' of their language. But surely all forms of communication, both within and across languages and cultures, are on various levels opaque, inscrutable, and resistant to translation.

Conclusion

Japanese views of their language have inevitably been tied to questions of ethnic identity, and notions of a spiritual presence to the language have often played into nationalistic and ultra-nationalistic ideologies. But surely the Japanese are not alone in having such ideas. During the past century in the West, we have seen how attempts to "purify the language of the tribe" have had political programs and repercussions. Ezra Pound is one obvious case, and we can include the names of Yeats, Eliot, and most notably Heidegger to those poets and philosophers who gave credence to fascist notions of language, blood and soil. In the case of my own country, Canada, language has been one of the key issues of Quebec identity. As a member of the dominant English-speaking majority in that country, my sense is that unilingual cultures also have a tendency to become univocal ones. But this is a more comfortable notion if one's own language has a certain universal currency, and does not fully recognize the cultural hegemony that a language can impose on others.

And what are the prospects for a "word-spirit" in modern, or should I say postmodern Japan? Have Western science, rationalism, and commercialism killed the primal belief in the power of words? Efforts to define the indefinable "Japanese spirit" — a spirit somehow synonymous with the language itself — gave rise in the past century to a kind of negative ideology, that of ultranationalism, but this was to idealize and systematize *kotodama*, the semantics of which are inherently resistant to definition. To speak of "*kotodama* thought" (as some do) is in a very real sense an oxymoron. Prewar Japanese ideology was in this sense plagued by its own internal contradictions. Karatani (1992) has suggested that the ideology of Japan's modernization in the 19th and 20th centuries was therefore essentially anomalous. Contemporary Japan has no need to deconstruct logocentric structures, as has been the mode of much Western theoretical discourse in recent times, simply because there never existed any structures to pull down. Premodern Japanese culture was in that sense equivalent to

postmodern culture, one which enjoyed the free play of free-floating signs without substantial signification. Roland Barthes perhaps recognized this quality when he called Japan the “Empire of Signs”. But such a notion ignores the enormous weight that institutions bear upon society in contemporary Japan. Is thought really so free and playful in this postmodern utopia?

Contemporary literary expression provides more trustworthy evidence of revival of belief in a “word-spirit”. This is to be expected, because literature stakes its very existence on the anarchic and polysemic power of language. European modernist literature expressed itself most keenly as a crisis of faith in language — Ionesco’s “words are not the word” (*les mots ne sont pas la parole*) — which was equally a crisis of faith in both God and humanity. This is no longer, or more properly never has been, a central problem for Japanese writers. The revival of a quasi-Shintoist faith in language is most explicit in works by the late Nakagami Kenji. (One posthumous work, *Kotodama no ametsuchi* (The Universe of the Word-Spirit) was a collaboration with the Shinto scholar Kamata Toji.) We can see this sensibility also more subliminally at work in the riotous word-play of Inoue Hisashi. Even the fetishism of the proper noun — products, brand-names, and fashionable restaurants and night-clubs — in Tanaka Yasuo’s *Nantonaku Kurisutaru* can be regarded as, not so much a critique of commercialism, but more as an atavistic embrace of the phenomenal world through language.

Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

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